

WORK-LIFE: AN INTERPLAY OF ISSUES

Patricia T. Hendel

National Association of Commissions for Women

I am pleased to be here today to participate in this exciting session on “Societal Issues of Work and Family” and to have just listened to such an informative talk by Cali Williams.

That we are, indeed, discussing such issues at a meeting on public policy and education is significant. Some of us or our mothers or aunts grew up in a world where there was no such agenda as we now are addressing. There was no National Association of Commissions for Women—no state commissions for women.

And, women were being taught the following that I found in a 1950 home economics book widely used throughout the United States. As women we were to:

- **GET YOUR WORK DONE.** Plan your tasks with an eye on the clock. Finish or interrupt them an hour before your husband is expected. Your anguished cry of “Are you home already?” is not exactly a warm welcome.
- **HAVE DINNER READY.** Plan ahead, even the night before, to have a delicious meal—*ON TIME*. This is a way of letting him know that you have been thinking about him and are concerned about his needs. Most men are hungry when they come home and the prospects of a good meal are part of the warm welcome needed.
- **PREPARE YOURSELF.** Take 15 minutes to rest so you will be refreshed when he arrives. Touch up your makeup, put a ribbon in your hair and be fresh looking. He has just been with a lot of work-weary people. Be a little gay and more interesting. His boring day may need a lift.
- **CLEAR THE CLUTTER.** Make one last trip through the last part of the house just before your husband arrives, gathering up school books, toys, paper, etc. Then run a dust cloth over the tables. Your husband will feel he has reached a haven of rest and order, and it will give you a lift, too.
- **PREPARE THE CHILDREN.** Take just a few minutes to wash the children’s hands and faces (if they are small), comb their hair and, if necessary, change their clothes. They are little treasures and he would like to see them playing the part.
- **MINIMIZE ALL NOISE.** At the time of his arrival, eliminate noise

of washer, dryer, dishwasher or vacuum. Try to encourage the children to be quiet.

- **BE HAPPY TO SEE HIM.** Greet him with a warm smile and act glad to see him.
- **SOME DON'TS.** Don't greet him with problems or complaints. Don't complain if he's late for dinner. Count this as minor, compared with what he must have gone through that day.
- **MAKE HIM COMFORTABLE.** Have him lean back into a comfortable chair or suggest he lie down in the bedroom. Have a cool or warm drink ready for him. Arrange his pillow and offer to massage his neck and shoulders and take off his shoes. Speak in a soft, soothing, pleasant voice. Allow him to relax—to unwind.
- **LISTEN TO HIM.** You may have a dozen things to tell him, but the moment of his arrival is not the time. Let him talk first.

I am not reading this to belittle the women who preceded us or to proclaim joy at how far we have come. Rather, it illustrates the environment in which work and life issues exist. At another time I could share with you the issues, biases, ignorance and downright discrimination that faced me and other women as we sought to take our place as elected officials and policymakers. Suffice it to say here, it is essential to remember the environment in which we live and work.

I must confess, though, that as a young mother I truly thought that my daughter would not have to deal with as many difficulties in the workplace as I did. But I have come to the bitter recognition that for working women today, balancing family and work is extraordinarily difficult and takes an incalculable toll on the quality of our lives. So, you can appreciate why my life—typical of many women's—has taken the circuitous path from academics to college administration to legislator to television and public affairs programming to part-time and now full-time advocate for women.

In the rest of the time allotted to me here, I want to share with you initiatives that have been and are being undertaken by American women in order to affect public policy in life and workplace areas. I want to talk about how states are implementing public policies to assist employees and employers in this challenge.

I will discuss four initiatives that take similar, but divergent approaches to addressing these issues.

■ **The Connecticut Women's Agenda.** This initiative represents the recognition that to be effective, women must collaborate and work together. Four or five years ago, the Connecticut legislature reduced the funding for the Connecticut

Permanent Commission on the Status of Women. (I should say here that the 270 or so commissions on women that belong to the National Association of Commissions on Women are all governmental bodies, established by state, local or county government and receiving varying amounts of public funding.) The funding cut meant we lost our legislative liaison—a key player if we were to accomplish one of our most important mandated functions: promoting legislation to improve/reduce areas of sex discrimination.

As trite as it may sound, necessity is indeed the mother of invention. So, we invited some of the statewide women's groups—including many not-for-profits—to a brown bag luncheon. We wanted to see whether we could or should work more together by sharing information and such.

That brown bag luncheon held one summer month several years ago has evolved into a strong group called the Connecticut Women's Agenda—a group through which we share information, develop priorities for attention during the legislative session, support each other at budget hearings and in the press, and collaborate to accomplish common goals. I have learned in my work with other state and local commissions throughout New England and the United States that many similar groups have developed where women have recognized that collaborative efforts have much more clout than single efforts.

■ **State and federal legislative initiatives** with impacts on women and the communication of those initiatives are two equally important parts of the second approach I want to share with you.

In Connecticut, we passed a *Pregnancy, Family and Medical Leave Act* ahead of the federal law. At our Commission on the Status of Women, we find most of the intake we have concerns women and workplace issues: issues of job loss due to gender discrimination, issues of family and medical leave, issues of employee rights. It takes intense effort to pass a law such as Pregnancy, Family and Medical Leave—whether at the state or federal level. And passage alone does not assure compliance. Regulations have to be adopted and, unfortunately, they often can thwart the intent of a law.

Also, the public must be made aware of the law and helped to understand their rights and responsibilities. In Connecticut, the Commission on the Status of Women has done extensive outreach—educating employers and employees, both public and private, about the intent and letter of the new law. Similar efforts have been made on the topic of sexual harassment.

Passage of the legislation was certainly a difficult first step, but educating people about the legislation can be every bit as difficult. For example, our efforts have included distributing English and Spanish pamphlets that describe our rights under the law and organizing teaching sessions with employers, supervisors and employees. Through this kind of outreach, laws develop some real impact and effectiveness.

Domestic violence has become clearly identified as a national problem that affects all aspects of our lives and certainly affects us as employees and employers. Even before the recent high profile case in California, states and the federal government began to address the issue with myriad laws: (1) registering convicted sex offenders, (2) curbing stalking, (3) prohibiting practices by motor vehicle insurance companies that discriminate on the basis of an individual's status as a victim of domestic violence (if one can't drive, one often cannot work!), and (4) limiting handguns.

The *Federal Violence Against Women Act* also recognizes the impact of violence on women in the totality of our lives. It finally has been funded, to address some of the enforcement and prevention aspects.

Child-support initiatives are growing throughout the country. Legislation dealing with enforcement of support payment decrees has been enacted at both state and federal levels, as have many initiatives dealing with paternity identification.

But, in case this sounds too easy, let me share with you just one example of the difficulty and complexity of passing strengthened child-support laws. When a strong effort was being made in the Connecticut legislature to count defaulted child-support payments against someone's credit record, the national credit bureau companies arrived at the state capitol to try to block or at least diminish the effort. Fortunately, through the concerted efforts of advocates for women and children, some key legislators, and the state attorney general, the law was passed. But, due to stalling efforts, the law's becoming effective required a good two years.

Change can be slow. And passage of a law does not assure that the intent of the law will be met.

Health is another area seeing a burgeoning of legislation. Prevention has not traditionally been a priority public policy. Even so, women are leading the march to get equitable health treatment: mammograms for all women, regardless of income group; breast cancer education; acts mandating maternity coverage for 48 hours after the birth of a newborn; and acts requiring portable insurance coverage.

But, as I stated in discussing state and federal legislative initiatives, there are two parts to this effort and they interrelate. Legislation is not adopted in a vacuum. It often—yes, usually—is adopted in response to a publicly acknowledged need. Still, mere adoption of legislation does not usually solve the problem. The public must know what the laws are and recognize that the legislative process is a dynamic one. As laws are implemented, they frequently need to be changed. . .modified. Public input and understanding are necessary to accomplish this.

So, we need and are getting laws affecting the workplace, but we must help create an informed public. Efforts to utilize the information superhighway are challenging and leading us to new levels of communication.

■ The third initiative that I want to share with you today is one developed by the Women's Bureau of the U.S. Department of Labor. Two years ago, the Bureau sponsored a survey called **"Working Women Count."** It was not a run-of-the-mill survey. Working women—not "experts"—provided the information. A scientific sample was conducted as a benchmark.

The Women's Bureau enlisted more than 1,600 partners to help distribute the survey questionnaire. The partners included 900 grassroots organizations, 75 unions, newspapers, national magazines and 300 businesses. These partners represented all 50 states, the Virgin Islands, Guam and Puerto Rico.

In an amazing four short months, a quarter of a million responses were made and tabulated. The resulting information showed strong consensus on the following main areas:

- Pay and benefits should provide economic security.
- Women want improved pay scales and health care insurance.
- Women also want a workplace culture of supporting and respecting families. They need child care services, so that work and family can be balanced. They need more flex time and other workplace initiatives.
- Working women need more access to training and retraining.
- They want more recognition and credit for what they do in the workplace.

To the credit of the Women's Bureau, the survey was not an end, but rather a means to an end. The bureau developed an honor roll, recognizing employers who address one of the main issues confronting women in the workplace. It already has honored many corporations and employers throughout the United States for efforts at providing child care, flex time, on-the-job training and other benefits.

So, what is to be learned here?

Initiatives require follow-through or follow-up. Studies must not just end up on a dusty shelf, but rather be followed by positive action.

Still another example of follow-up as an effective form of public policy is the upcoming [September 28] national conference via satellite on the topic of "The UN Women's Conference One Year Later." Women from all over the United States will be assembling to hear from their area's participants in the Beijing Conference. Then, via nationwide satellite teleconference with the First Lady and U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Service, they will discuss activities and progress accomplished during the last year.

Local panelists will include National Association of Commissions for Women leaders, congresswomen and congressmen, professors, and community activists. Isn't this kind of grassroots effort an exciting way to keep issues before the public and to help create a climate of public opinion and public concern about them?

■ The fourth initiative I want to describe is one being undertaken by the Connecticut Permanent Commission on the Status of Women.

Although we are a small state, we found that too many of our activities are in the state capitol. We found that even in our small geographic area, women have different issues and concerns. Beyond that, we had not institutionalized regional meetings, although from time to time we had held meetings or hearings around the state.

So, last year we instituted a **Congressional District Advisory Council** in each of our congressional districts. We sought nominees for membership on the council and now have an impressive group of women serving on these advisory groups. We used this structure to do our own follow-up breakfasts to discuss the results of the "Working Women Count" survey. This afternoon [September 17] we also are launching the first in a series of three conferences entitled "CT Women Vote!"

The first conference program will include a session on "Study the Issues." We will be discussing how we have managed health care reform, what it takes to balance the budget, the high cost of growing old in America, and affirmative action's effects on our schools and workplaces. Our participants will represent government, social services, academics, business and labor, and communities. From the briefings and panel discussions, we will develop an action plan that includes state and federal legislative and administrative initiatives.

Thus, states are implementing public policies in various ways—through legislation, administrative reform and education. We also must recognize the role of the courts and the impact judicial interpretation has on our lives.

As I hope has become clear this afternoon, I have come to believe that an active, informed public is the best vehicle to meet the challenges of the issues facing us as Americans—especially in the critical area of work and life.

As Marion Roth, a Massachusetts photographer, notes in her current exhibit on women and work: "Work is not only to support us, but for itself. Work is the way most of us have contact with the world. . . it is the place where we do most of the learning of ourselves and of our lives."

I submit that only through communication, outreach, education and grassroots participation (including voting!) can we bring about change that addresses that work and our families.

Property Rights: Their Allocation and Distribution

